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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 000227

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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: INFORMATION MINISTER ON PRESIDENT
YAR'ADUA'S HEALTH, PRESS FREEDOM

REF: ABUJA 203 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Ambassador Robin Renee Sanders for reasons 1.4. (b & d).

11. (C) Summary: Ambassador met February 3 with new Information Minister Dr. Dora Akunyili to discuss a range of issues from President Yar'Adua's health, to challenges to press freedoms in Nigeria, to the arrest in Kano of famed movie producer Iyantama over a partially-US funded DVD on religious tolerance. Akunyili, a technocrat and trained medical doctor, was originally disappointed when it was announced in the November 2008 cabinet reshuffle that she would not get the Health Ministry, but would serve as Information Minister instead. Ambassador had several discussions with her in the aftermath where she noted that she would try to find a way to embrace the job, but would not tolerate being used to spread falsehoods. In this latest meeting, the Information Minister noted to the Ambassador that she had decided to try to change things from within the Villa by first encouraging Yar'Adua and First Lady Turai to be less secretive about the President's health. She promised that there would be no more "shutting down" of press outlets that discuss or mentioned Yar'Adua's health, and that she would "look into" the detention in Kano of Nigerian film maker Iyantama. On Yar'Adua's health, she stressed that he remained weak, but still mentally focused, and that he continued to tell her he would never ask her to "lie" about a GON issue as the official government spokesperson. Akunyili also shared with the Ambassador that she had been meeting with Yar'Adua in his residence as opposed to the Villa, and that she had been told that foreign medical doctors had been brought into the Villa to oversee the President's health during his reported "vacation." The new Information Minister is well known for being tough, honest, and outspoken, winning her lots of friends (as well as enemies) when she was head of the National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC). She has worried about her integrity being compromised in her new position, and has vowed not to let that happen. She plans to roll out a "branding campaign" for Nigeria the week of February 9 that focuses on presenting Nigeria in a new light in the international community. We see her as a credible interlocutor on some of Yar'Adua health issues. Although she may not have all the details, she can at least provide a sense of his physical appearance and energy levels during her encounters. End Summary.

Yar'Adua's Health Issues

12. (C) In a February 3 meeting with GON Information and Communications Minister Dr. Dora Akunyili, she briefed the Ambassador in a private one-on-one meeting on her views on President Yar'Adua's health. She noted that she last saw the Nigerian President, along with his wife Turai, in late January in his residence in Abuja, where she noted that he was extremely physically weak, but competent mentally and could carry on a normal conversation. Akunyili added that most of her conversation with the President focused on getting both he and his wife to go "public" with his travel plans, particularly as Yar'Adua was pressing to leave Nigeria for two weeks (reftel). The Information Minister added that despite her efforts, what was decided was not what she recommended. In the end, given the public worry on his health and any travel outside of Nigeria for that purpose, Yar'Adua and his inner circle decided instead to bring in specialists, as opposed to the President traveling abroad. Ambassador asked Akunyili if she knew what type of specialists had been brought in and was she aware of the types of ailments Yar'Adua may be suffering from, such as lung cancer. She said she did not know what type, but thought they were German, and as far as she knew, the only issue was his serious kidney ailment. Akunyili promised to keep the Ambassador informed, and also said she would continue her efforts to get President Yar'Adua and his inner circle to be more forthcoming and stop the shroud of secrecy over his health.

2011 Presidential Election

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13. (C) The Ambassador turned the conversation to other issues. She asked Akunyili, since she attends the weekly cabinet meetings, how things seemed to be going from her point of view in terms of the dynamics in the cabinet. The Information Minister noted that there remained a lot of organizational challenges as the new Ministers try to get organized. She noted that after the last cabinet session Agricultural Minister Ruma (a close confidant of Yar'Adua, and rumored to be the President's former kidney donor) ask her if she would become a member of the Yar'Adua re-election committee for 2011. Akunyili said that she was shocked by even the idea of Yar'Adua running again and expressed this to Ruma. The Information Minister added that Ruma was not happy and instructed Akunyili not to express these views to anyone else in the government as they would be seen as disloyal. Akunyili confided to the Ambassador that a Yar'Adua attempt to run again would be an "embarrassment to the nation," and that she did not want any part of it. (reftel)

Press Freedoms

15. (C) Ambassador raised USG concerns over recent past GON heavy-handed tactics with the press, noting that these were worrying signs for press freedoms in Nigeria. Akunyili acknowledged this and said she was working to stop these types of actions and is trying to build better access and relationships between the GON and the Nigerian independent press. She asked if the USG could help with capacity building workshops and seminars for the press as well as for the Ministry of Information staff. The Ambassador said she would look into such options as a public diplomacy specialist under the USG speaker program, but added that budget issues are at play and that she would have to wait until later in the summer of 2009 to see what was possible to fund.

Comment

16. (C) Akunyili is one of the few straight talkers in Nigeria overall and particularly in this government. It will be interesting to see how long she lasts as we feel that the reason the GON Administration decided not to appoint this qualified technocrat into the most logical ministry for her

skills -- the Health Ministry -- was to use the goodwill and respect that Nigerians have for Akunyili to their advantage. Akunyili was extremely disappointed with the information portfolio and went to see the President on the issue after her appoint. She told the Ambassador then that Yar'Adua asked to "please do this for him." So she accepted. Akunyili stated she believes Yar'Adua has a good heart, but is surrounded by bad people. Akunyili holds fast to the view that she will not allow herself to be used, and will easily walk away if she feels this is happening. We would argue that this is already starting to happen given Agricultural Minister Ruma's request that she be on the Yar'Adua 2011 re-election committee. This was clearly an attempt to co-opt her, as well as use Akunyili's positive image as an endorsement of a 2011 Yar'Adua run. Akunyili turned down the offer to be on the committee, but we will see how this plays out for her in the short-term. She is adamant that she will work hard to provide more transparency in the GON, and will not lie about the President's health. Whether she will always have access to key information on this and other issues down the line will remain to be seen, particularly as she is not a ruling party stalwart or Yar'Adua insider. END COMMENT.
SANDERS